

## Act II - Ryun

The dungeon was huge, a massive labyrinth of corridors and caverns. Ryun couldn't see anything, but he could feel some of their surroundings, at least roughly. Anrosh told him that it looked like parts of the caverns had structures carved out of them—pillars and such bearing engravings. There were stone halls and corridors, making the area out to be some big underground city. Ryun had a nagging suspicion about that, given the things he remembered and what he had seen here, including the conversations he'd had with the Infinite Realm's monsters.

But as his memories came back and he remembered the things like his and Mel's encounter with the Aspects of True Death, he became more certain about his suspicions than ever. The Infinite Realm was filled with the pieces of other civilizations, those from other versions of the Framework, like the one that the Aspect of True Death had come from. It was littered with other races from across the universe who hadn't been chosen by the Framework, who had been destroyed and their pieces taken to be reused.

That told him a lot about the cruelty of the Framework, and he wondered if perhaps the Infinite Realm would be scrapped and something new brought into being. But he didn't have much time to dwell on those thoughts—not while inside the dungeon, at least.

They had encountered several different types of golems. There were the guardians, which were slow but strong, as well as other types which were faster and had elemental powers. Apparently, one more reason why Heartstone was so sought by golem makers was because the ore could be imbued by aspects, giving it elemental powers. It was an ore, even though it kind of looked like stone, and they had been collecting all the golems they defeated into their storage rings—or their pieces, actually. While not as valuable as the raw ore, their bodies could be refined and used for new creation. What treasure they were getting was varied, but mostly of good quality, principally rare pieces of equipment and alchemical ingredients and potions. Little of it would be useful for Ryun, but they had already killed a few hundred golems and gotten substantial rewards for doing so. They would either sell the equipment in the core or distribute it to the sect's inner market.

Their progress through the dungeon was slow, and they didn't take on more than five enemies if they could help it. Ryun could blast through them easily, but Eerv and Anrosh had some problems dealing with them—Eerv, because he relied on his venom aspect to take down his opponents, which didn't work against golems, and Anrosh because she wasn't yet strong enough. On the other hand, the golems were giving them a lot of Essence. Ryun himself had already gathered a few thousand Greater Essence, and Anrosh even more. The dungeon had proven lucrative already, even if they were moving slowly.

But that was fine with Ryun, as it allowed him to test his powers, to try different things and practice. He realized just how rusty he was. He wasted Qi when he didn't need to, and he relied far too much on his stats. That had to change.

They continued moving through the dungeon, going deeper into the mountain and coming up on another group of golems. Their shape wasn't like the ones they had encountered before; Ryun could sense that they had four arms, each ending in a long blade, and they were more humanoid looking, being taller and thinner.

The golems were in another cavern, standing in the center and blocking the three ways out of the room. The entire dungeon seemed to be series of interconnected corridors that were almost labyrinthine, but every room was like a small arena, with monsters inside just standing and waiting. Eerv had informed him that respawning dungeons were generally that way, whereas wild dungeons resembled living and breathing towns or cities.

“Tell me,” Ryun said. He hadn’t figured out yet how to pull up the names and levels of monsters inside his head like he could with his screens. Perhaps it wasn’t even possible.

Anrosh answered him. “They are dark in color, almost metallic. Perhaps they have some kind of related aspect. Their blades look sharp. Level one hundred and fifty.”

He nodded. None of the golems had a Cultivation Realm, but he figured that was because they weren’t living beings. Still, he could tell that Cultivation had had a hand in their creation; it wasn’t something that he could explain, but he felt it. The ability of the material to absorb the aspect and take on its properties would imply something like that as well. Eerv didn’t know much, as golems weren’t his focus.

Ryun thought about what they should do. Eerv was probably even more at a disadvantage here, as the metallic nature of the golems would likely be an additional hindrance. Anrosh could probably handle one, as her **Absolute Cold** could affect them.

So he made a quick plan.

Walking toward the four golems and getting their attention, Anrosh followed behind while Eerv stood back.

Ryun’s **{Null Mantle}** was already active, and he pushed his bonuses into his wisdom. His Qi moved as he prepared another technique just as the golems noticed him and moved—they were faster than the other types they had encountered before.

Ryun waited for one to get close, and then unleashed his **{Breath of Destruction}**.

A plume of Void Qi shaped into a destructive breath left his mouth and hit the golem in the shoulder, disintegrating it and half of its right side along with two of its four arms. The golem stumbled and Ryun got in close, grabbing it by its remaining arms before then throwing it back toward Anrosh, letting her deal with a handicapped opponent.

The three other golems came at him, their four arms swinging at him. Ryun’s skill told him exactly from where every attack came, and he moved, evading and leading the three golems away from Anrosh and her fight with the damaged golem.

Once on the other side of the room, Ryun focused on his **Void Aura** perk. He left it at its original range, as the golems were already in it. He kept his sense on them, making sure that all of their attacks were mundane, only physical, while he evaded. Once he was certain, he activated his **Untethered Cloud**.

His body switched states, from solid to something resembling gas—a void in space. The golems attacked and their blades cut through the cloud, passing through without injuring him. He still felt their passage, and he sensed that his Void Qi had damaged the blades as they passed. His physical damage resistance was incredibly high, even without the cloud being active, but he could feel that if they attacked long enough he would start taking damage. So while the golems tried to damage him, he activated his **Void Aura**.

The aura blasted out of him, three meters around him in all directions were suddenly filled with Void Qi. He furiously spent his Qi, half of it in a single burst to increase the damage output.

The effect was immediate, and strange to observe through his sense. The golems started disintegrating from the outside in, the Void eating at the surfaces of their bodies and quickly carving uneven holes as they moved, trying to cut him. He held his aura for two seconds, and with all of his bonus in his wisdom, the damage was insane. One golem's legs broke as they lost enough mass that they could no longer support the rest, and as the golem fell its body cracked and fell apart. The other two simply suffered too much damage and fell over.

Ryun shut his aura off and followed the remaining effect of his Void Qi as its remnant ate away at the mass of the golems' bodies, then turned his senses to the fight on the other side of the room. Anrosh was using her sword to block and attack the golem with sure and powerful strikes, each carrying with it the aspect of cold. The golem seemed covered in something which he figured was a sheen of frost, and it was definitely slowed down. He could hear creaking as it moved. There then came a crack, and the golem fell to the ground, unmoving. Anrosh stood above it, catching her breath. She wasn't really tired, he could tell, but the golem wasn't the easiest opponent for her.

Ryun checked his Essence and saw that he had gained around a thousand Essence from this room, some probably for the one he crippled, but most of that one should've gone to Anrosh. Eerv walked up to them, looking at the dead golems.

"If we had high-tier crafters in the sect, they could use their bodies to craft powerful weapons and armor... Regardless, they will fetch a good price in the core," Eerv said, then shook his head. "This dungeon is too hard for us."

"What do you mean? We haven't had any issues, not really," Ryun asked.

"I mean, it isn't too hard for us three. Even I could fight these golems, with a good team and the right items at least. But we are relying on this dungeon to be a source of income for us. If we can't farm it every time it is respawned, then we will not be using it efficiently. There are very few people in the Black—ah, the Twilight Melody Sect—who could beat the golems. And I doubt that you will be willing to spend all your time here farming it," Eerv answered.

Ryun nodded his head. He had no desire to do that. He had learned that the more times one did the same dungeon, the less Essence one got from it. Even if he could use his **[Reave]** on every monster, it wouldn't be an efficient use of his time. It was really annoying that **[Reave]** didn't work on them, but he figured that it did make sense—the golems weren't ever really close to death, exactly, and his ability specified that as a requirement. Golems were either on or off. They could sustain incredible amounts of damage and still operate as if they were at full capacity.

Still, he was getting a lot of Essence from killing them, so he didn't complain. Others had no cheat abilities like he did.

"You said that we could rent it out," Ryun reminded him.

"I think we will have to do that, but... That will complicate things. It might bring attention to us that we might not be able to handle," Eerv said slowly. "But we can discuss that after we finish the dungeon."

Ryun wanted to know more, but he agreed that they should continue. He walked over to the treasure chest that had spawned near the end of the room, and chucked a piece of stone at it. When it didn't wake up and try to eat his face, he got closer and opened it. He sensed a single object inside, and reached down for it.

<b>Blade of Weight</b>	+15 to strength
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Once per fight you can activate <b>Weight</b> . <b>Weight:</b> double the weapon's mass.
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Ryun read the screen that popped up inside his mind. It was a good weapon, with a powerful effect if put into the right hands. The sword itself was double edged, large and heavy: a two-hander for sure. He turned around and looked at Anrosh. The weapon would suit her perfectly. He smiled as he walked over to her and offered it.

“I think you should take this,” Ryun said.

Anrosh looked down, Ryun presumed at the sword. “Didn’t we agree that everything goes to the sect?”

Ryun sensed Eerv shift his weight, but he didn’t chime in. “You are a part of the sect.”

He could see that she was reluctant, but finally she accepted and murmured a thanks, too low to be heard, but he sensed it.

They chose a path and continued forward.

Ryun wasn’t sure how long they’d been fighting golems, but it was good practice for him. The monsters weren’t so weak that he could destroy them effortlessly, but they weren’t so dangerous to him that he needed to use his full strength all the time. He had the time to test out things and practice using his powers, too.

After what seemed like hours of fighting all types of golems, they reached the final room. In it was the final golem: the boss of the dungeon. The cavern they were in was large, a half globe that stretched so far above that it was almost to the edge of his senses. The room had eight massive pillars and a large round square. The boss stood in the center, and was the largest golem they had encountered yet—at least three times as tall as Ryun, and shaped more like a human being.

“Describe it to me,” Ryun said.

Anrosh stepped up next to him. “It looks like a massive beast, a cross between a human and something else. It...it is almost lifelike, but its skin is completely pale white. But the detail... it, or rather whatever it was based on has short fur, and it looks like it’s been carved in Heartstone. I can’t tell what type of Heartstone it is made out of.”

“Mithril, I believe,” Eerv chimed in.

“Right,” Anrosh said with a quick nod. “It has two swords at its sides, too, each as tall as I am.”

Most of this Ryun himself could tell with his senses, but perhaps not in as much detail.

“It is level one hundred and eighty. Enduring Golem,” Anrosh said.

“Third evolution,” Eerv said. “A tough opponent.”

That was the strongest monster in the dungeon, and the highest level monster Ryun had ever faced. He had spent all of their fights so far paying close attention to the golems, seeing their limits, their strengths and weaknesses.

“Let me take it alone,” he said.

“Ryun...” Anrosh started, but he just turned in her direction and smiled.

“I know, I do tend to be somewhat arrogant. I promise you that this isn’t an example of that. I need to test myself when I can use everything that I can, to go all out and see how powerful I really am when I am whole.”

He knew that neither Anrosh nor Eerv understood; they hadn’t known about the wall in his head. Anrosh suspected something, though, had seen the change in him, and he had noticed her looks when she thought he wasn’t paying attention to her. He would need to have a conversation with her, but now was not the time.

He took a step forward and the two didn’t try to stop him. He took a deep breath and started pulling potions out from his storage. He drank a few potions that would temporarily boost his stats, then pulled out Kagehime into his right hand. He entered a breathing form and **{Qi Armor}** sprang into existence around him.

He activated **{Null Mantle}** and arranged his stats equally into strength, dexterity, and wisdom.

Finally he pulled out a vial from his Void Storage. The **Vial of Shadow** was now attached to a piece of string, and he put it around his neck. The golems so far had all been using vision and sound as their primary senses. He didn’t know how that was accomplished or why, but it was a weakness. Ryun opened the cork of the vial and felt Anrosh and Eerv startle. He could feel something that reminded him of Shadow Essence when he drew it in, and he knew that he was now shrouded in a half sphere that spread ten meters around him, but the darkness didn’t impede his sense at all.

He jumped into the air, the dark sphere around him following, using the vial as its center. He shaped a cube and started jumping around the cavern, picking up speed. The golem in the center noticed, and moved it raised its weapon and started tracking the ball of darkness. Ryun finally picked up enough speed and pushed off a cube, flying straight at the golem.

It swiped its two swords toward the darkness, aiming at its center. Ryun shaped a cube with his hand and swung around it, changing direction. The two swords hit the cube and shattered it, but Ryun had already flown to the side. He shaped another cube on his foot and pushed off, shooting straight at the golem’s side. He **|Cut|** using a weaker version of his skill, and Kagehime hit the golem’s shoulder, cutting shallowly into the metallic surface.

The golem swung around immediately and Ryun shaped a wall, putting more Qi in it and making it stronger. The wall of Qi stopped its swords, rebounding them and making the golem stumble backward. Ryun fell to the ground, and then used **|Pounce|** to launch himself at the golem.

He could tell that it couldn’t see him, as it swung widely and missed. It was now completely engulfed in his darkness. Ryun used **|Greater Cut|** and a blade superimposed itself over Kagehime just as he swiped at the golem’s knee. His sword cut into the limb, going halfway through before it moved incredibly quickly and saved the rest of its leg.

Then a shockwave left its body in a sphere, a kinetic strike that threw Ryun off the floor and sent him flying. Quickly, he twisted midair and shaped a wall beneath his legs, catching himself and bleeding off the momentum thanks to his **True Body**. Kinetic attacks were too ineffective to hurt him.

He launched himself forward again and activated his **Presence of the Eternal Hunter**. Immediately he felt a boost to his stats, and the golem slowed. Ryun moved around it, attacking, cutting and slashing, cutting pieces of it off.

The golem was powerful, but it couldn't see him, and it was too slow with his aura to react in time to catch him. He felt its swords giving off some kind of heat and figured that it was using another ability, but it didn't matter if it couldn't catch him.

Ryun figured that he had tested his mobility enough and moved to the final part of his attack plan. He jumped back out of the golem's range, leaving it out of the darkness. He switched his breathing form and summoned his **{Avatar of the Reaper}**. Feeling the connection blossom again, he felt like a being with two bodies.

Dropping his **{Qi Armor}**, he began moving his Qi in preparation for his most powerful technique. As he did so, he felt that the draw was doubled as half of his Qi flowed into the avatar, just as he'd intended.

He jumped forward, heading straight at the golem that was filled with cuts all over its body. The avatar jumped forward and out of the darkness, and the golem focused on it, moving forward to attack. Ryun jumped into the air just as the avatar dodged beneath the golem's swords and got in close. Ryun landed on its shoulder and triggered his technique.

**{Darkest End}** billowed out, both out of him and the avatar at the same moment. The avatar crumbled from the force, and the expanding sphere of destruction had already left the construct. The two spheres hit the golem from both sides, each sphere pushing the golem into the other. The golem's body disintegrated under the two destructive forces of the void; the floor beneath where the avatar had stood just simply disappeared, too, as it was eaten by the void. The golem's head snapped off and ricocheted out of the impact zone, and was sent off flying across the cavern from the forces that annihilated its body.

And then the waves dissipated, leaving a hole in the ground and nothing else left of the golem's body. Ryun shaped a Qi cube below his feet and then put the cork back into the vial, the darkness rushing back as he closed it.

He stood in the air and saw the notifications appearing in his head.

Congratulations on clearing the Heartstone Core Dungeon!

New title available!

Reward—Heartstone Core title now available

Heartstone Core	First to clear the Heartstone Core Dungeon	+2% to all stats, 50,000 Greater Essence
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Ryun did a double take at the reward and then smiled. The dungeon had given him a great deal of Essence, speeding up his advancement significantly.

He sensed Eerv and Anrosh, both staring at him, or at least that was what he thought they were doing. He jumped across the room as he let go of his techniques and landed near them.

“So, want to see what kind of treasure we got?”

Without waiting for an answer, Ryun turned around and headed for the chest. He was really interested to see what they had won.

Eerv had implied that clearing a dungeon for the first time should give better rewards than what those doing it after would get. And since their rewards so far had been unremarkable, he was really hoping for something great.

He approached the treasure chest, first throwing a piece of rubble at it to check if it was a real chest. Then he opened it and sensed inside.

There were some Essence Crystals in the corner, as well as a basket filled with potions. But Ryun, sensing something more interesting inside, reached in and pulled it out. It was a soft fabric, and as Ryun felt around it he realized that it was a cloak complete with a hood. Its screen popped up in his head and he read through it.

<b>Mantle of the Undying</b>	+50 to Vitality While wearing this cloak, all healing effects on the user have 50% increased effectiveness.
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Ryun's mouth opened in surprise. It was an incredible item, and it would suit him perfectly. With his **Feast** perk it would synergize incredibly well, letting him heal even faster.

He put it aside, but planned on claiming it for himself. Then looked at the potions. He read each one and then smiled. The treasure at the end of the dungeon seemed to have lived up to what Eerv had suggested.

Ryun turned around to the others and let them see.

They had found many powerful treasures before now, things that Eerv felt they could sell for a good price, but what was in the last chest Ryun was going to keep for them, and for the sect. He had many half-formed thoughts, and perhaps it was time that he start turning them into plans.

He ruled a sect now, and he wanted to do something more, to be more than what he had become on Earth.

Ryun was free to do whatever he wanted—and for the first time in a long time, he was fully himself.